Uncle Sam of Freedom Ridge

Margaret Prescott Montague

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UNCLE SAM
OF
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UNCLE SAM
of
FREEDOM RIDGE

By

Margaret Prescott Montague

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UNCLE SAM
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Uncle Sam of Freedom Ridge

I

"He always maintained he was born on the battlefield, an' that's where I reckon he'd want his story to commence," the postmaster said, as he hunched his lank young body up on a high stool, waving the reporter politely to the rocking-chair.

News of an old Uncle Sam of Freedom Ridge, and of a vow that a whole countryside had taken, had got into the papers, and one of the big dailies sent a reporter down to the little village of Newton, tucked away among its Southern moun-

tains, to see if there was a story in it for its Sunday edition. At the post-office, where the reporter made inquiries, the postmaster, Blair Rogers, looked out at him through his little window for a scrutinizing moment, and then invited him into the back office.

"I'm glad you came to me first," he confided. "I'd rather you got the story from me than anybody else, unless it would be Andrew Mason. The two of us, Andy an' me, knew our old Uncle Sam better'n any one else, I reckon. We were particular friends of his boy young Sam, an' when he left for the trainin'-camp, we promised to look out for the old man. But I reckon we both fell down on the job," he added, sorrowfully. "Oh,

doggone it!" he burst out, "this is a damned lonesome world sometimes!"

He fell into a moody silence, staring unseeingly at the screen of letter-boxes that divided the post-office in two. It appeared to be a slack time, and except for a few people who came in now and then to ask for mail, or buy stamps, the two men had the little back office to themselves, with its safe, its desk cluttered with post-office paraphernalia, its big ugly stove, and its general smell of newspapers and stamping ink.

"I want to tell you Uncle Sam's story as near as I can from the way he'd look at it," the postmaster resumed; "an' I know he'd say it began with his father's bein' killed

in the Civil War. That was the first *big* thing that happened to him, an' was what always made him say he was born on the battlefield. He was just a kid then, not near old enough to fight. But his father was fightin' on the Union side, an' he ran away an' got to him somehow, just before the battle of Cedar Creek, where his father was killed. Sometimes—not often—he'd tell us boys, young Sam an' Andy Mason an' me, about it: how, when the fightin' was over, he got out on the battlefield lookin' for his father, an' how he found his dead body an' stayed by it all night. He never forgot that night, him watchin' by his father, little an' lonesome an' scared, cryin' off an' on, an' shiverin'; the big sky over-

head, an' on the ground some men lyin' still forever more, an' some alive an' sufferin', an' every now an' then lanterns winkin' by with a buryin' party.

"Well, along just before day, he was so tired out, he curled up like a little stray dog, I reckon, an' whimpered himself off to sleep with his head on his father's breast. An' when he woke up he was different. He never could exactly say what had happened to him, whether he'd had a kind of a vision or what, but he had a notion, sleepin' like that against his father's breast, that what was in that dead man's heart, what he'd volunteered for, an' died for, had been sort of passed on to him. When he woke up, he wasn't just a little scared boy any more,

he was a member of somethin' bigger, and that somethin' was his country. And it was all sort of mixed up with his religion. I don't b'lieve the old man ever *did* know where his country stopped an' his God began. He never exactly put into words what had come to him, but he didn't have to; the way he *looked* when he told about it was enough for us boys. His eyes would blaze, an' his face take on a kind of holy look, like it was lighted up from inside. It always kind of lighted us up to see him.

"Well, after the war, him an' his mother moved here to Newton, an' settled up there on what they named Freedom Ridge. You can see it from here," he added, waving

his hand toward a high ridge in the distance, standing out clear and sharp against the early spring sky. "I've heard the old folks say he flew the United States flag up there when that flag was mighty unpopular round here, most of the Newton men havin' fought for the South, an' when he stood a right good show to be shot for doin' it. But he wouldn't have cared for that. I don't reckon there was ever a day in his life—young man or old one—when he wouldn't have been glad an' proud to die for that flag.

"Well," the postmaster paused, reflectively, "I guess he'd say the next big thing that happened to him was the birth of young Sam, and the death of his wife. He

didn't marry until right late in life, an' his wife died the second year and left him with a little young baby. All the folks thought he ought to put the baby with some woman to raise. But he didn't. He raised him himself, right up there on the Ridge, an' I reckon everybody round here would say he did the job all right. We never had a finer, straighter young feller to grow up in this county. Him an' Andy Mason an' me were all of an age, an' extra special friends. Why, some of the best times I ever had were out there on the Ridge, squirrel an' rabbit huntin' in the fall, an' helpin' with the sugar water in the spring. An' there never was a kinder old man. He had a sort of understandin' way

that would make a kid go to him if he was in trouble almost as quick as he'd go to his own mother.

"I can't remember when everybody didn't call him Uncle Sam. His first name *was* Sam, but that wasn't the reason. It was because he looked just exactly like Uncle Sam. His hair was white and kind of long, an' he had the same little chin beard, an' a lean jaw, an' eyes right far back in his head, that usually looked pleasant and friendly, but could look at you mighty straight if he caught you bein' mean or tricky. Why, he looked so like Uncle Sam that when I was real little I always thought the pictures in the papers was just photographs of our Uncle Sam—funny what a kid thinks.

II

"WELL, then the Big War came, an' the day after America went in, young Sam volunteered. Anybody would've known he would, raised like he'd been. Andy Mason an' me tried to get in, too, but they turned us both down—him on account of his eyes, an' me for flat-foot, doggone it!

"There was a big crowd of us up at the station when young Sam left for camp. An' you never saw anybody look so lifted up an' proud as the old man did. He kep' it up, too, right to the minute that

the train slid out of sight round the bend; an' then, all of a sudden, somethin' seemed to snap in him, all the lights went out, an' he got out of the crowd in a hurry. That boy was all he had in the world, an' they'd never spent a night away from each other in all his life.

"Andy an' me followed the old man, an' unhitched his team for him; an' when he got up on the drivin'-seat, we both tumbled into the wagon-bed behind, plannin' to go up an' spend the evenin' with him, an' sort of jolly him along. But at the forks where the left-hand turn of the road goes up to Freedom Ridge, he pulled up, an' says, 'I'll let you boys out here'; an' of course there wasn't anythin' for us to do but to get out. He was

up against somethin' bigger than we had anythin' to do with. He set his jaw, an' drove on, not lookin' to either side; but I can see the straight, lonesome look of his old back now.

"He faced it out all by himself up there on the Ridge that night. The next day he came down to the village as usual, an' though he looked like he'd had a spell of sickness, he was perfectly satisfied an' calm. I reckon the love of his country an' of his boy had sort of melted together in his heart, an' so he'd found himself all right. Some folks tried to sympathize with him, but he wouldn't stand for any pity. 'He's the best I've got,' he'd say, 'but he's none too good if his country wants him,

an' he's fightin' to end war, an' bring the nations together onced for all; an' that's the finest cause ever a man put gun to shoulder for.'

"An' he believed that, too. He believed America went into the war with the highest motives, an' he never doubted but that she'd carry 'em on right through to the end. His country answered to the highest thing that was in him; an' when he saw her kind of consecrated an' goin' the high way she did go in 1917 and 1918, why, his old heart was right down on its knees to her all the time. An' I wish you could have seen him when the different drives for the Red Cross and the Liberty Loans an' all began. He was in every parade we had, an' always dressed like a regular Uncle

Sam. The ladies of the Red Cross rigged him up that way for their first drive, an' he made such a tearin'-down hit, folks got him to do it for every drive afterwards. He was the most wonderful Uncle Sam you ever saw—nothin' ever funny or cheap about *him*. He might be goin' around in his overalls and shirt-sleeves, lookin' ordinary enough; but the minute he put on his Uncle Sam outfit, he was more than himself, he was the noblest spirit of his country, solemn an' dignified, an' lifted up, with a kind of holy look on his face. It was owin' to him that our district was always the first in the county, an' right often in the state, too, to go over the top in every drive. They got into the way of borrowin' him

to help out all over this county, an' into the next two counties as well. But we never loaned him till we were over the top ourselves.

"Well——" the postmaster paused, staring away out of the window. "Well, then, young Sam was killed over in France—Château-Thierry," he said. "Andy Mason was up at the telegraph tower when the message came through from the War Office, and the telegraph operator gave it to him to take out to Uncle Sam. Andy stopped by the post-office lookin' awful an' white, an' just as we were wonderin' how we were ever goin' to break it to the old man, we saw him comin' in. We were havin' a rally that day for one of the Liberty Loans, an' he was all dressed and

proud-lookin' in his stars and stripes.

"We hustled everybody out of the back part of the office, so when he came in there wasn't anybody here but just Andy and me. But he saw quick enough somethin' was wrong.

"'What's the trouble, Buddies?' he says, lookin' so kind an' affectionate, an' concerned for us, an' callin' us Buddy, like he always did when we were kids an' had got hurt.

"Well," said the postmaster, speaking with difficulty, "well, that just made it so I couldn't have spoken a word to save my life; but Andy—he's got more to him'n I have—he put his arm round the old man, an' managed to get out what had happened.

"We thought he was goin' to faint, he turned so white an' shaky, an' we got him quick into that chair where you're sittin'. But he didn't; he just sat there lookin' like the world had dropped from under him, an' saying right soft to himself, 'Sam's dead—my boy's dead.' Andy gave him the telegram, an' he spread it out on his knee, an' looked an' looked at it. I don't b'lieve he read it, but he kep' spreadin' it out an' spreadin' it out with his shakin' old hands, an' lookin' at it. We couldn't keep the tears back seein' him so lost like, an' anyhow, young Sam was just like a brother to us both.

"An' then, all at once, the old man caught sight of his red-an'

white-striped pants leg, an' a change came over him. That seemed to jerk him back to himself again. He took up a pinch of the stuff, an' looked at it like it was the only real thing left in the world to him. Then he says, sort of feelin' his way out of the dark, 'Sam's dead—but *Uncle* Sam's alive.' After that he bowed his head down on his hands an' shut his eyes, but I don't know whether he was prayin' to God or his country. And *then*, if you'll believe me, he got to his feet an' threw back his shoulders straight an' proud like, an' says, 'Well, boys, I promised to help 'em with the Liberty Loan this afternoon, an' it's time I was over at the courthouse now.' And with that he put his Uncle Sam's hat on

an' his head up in the air, an' marched on out of the post-office, an'—an'—if there wasn't bugles blowin' somewhere for that old man then, why, there ought to have been.

"Well, of course, word had got about that young Sam was killed, an' nobody looked to see the old man at the meetin'; an' when he came marchin' in in all his regalia, an' took his place up on the platform, just as proud as ever, I tell you that meetin' pretty nigh came to an end. Judge Braxton was makin' the openin' address, an' he couldn't hardly finish. He got through somehow, though, an' then he called for the Star-Spangled Banner; an' when everybody stood up, the judge sort of pushed Uncle

Sam to the front of the platform an' stood behind him with his hand on his shoulder, not sayin' anythin', just showin' him off to the crowd. There was tears in the judge's eyes, but there wasn't any in the old man's. He just stood up there wrapped up in that proud *carried-away* look of his, and that was enough for the crowd. Nobody had to make any appeal; the folks just looked at Uncle Sam, with his boy dead over there in France, and our quota for that Liberty Loan went over the top like a scared rabbit.

"But the old man never dreamed it was done for him. He always did sort of lose his own identity when he was Uncle Sam, an' he supposed, of course, they were

payin' tribute to their country. He was too humble-minded ever to take anything to himself.

"But when it was all over, an' he could quit bein' Uncle Sam, an' be himself again, he turned round to Andrew Mason, an' says, 'Take me home now, Andy,' all broken up an' pitiful; and then he says, 'Where's Blair?' So I got somebody to stay in the postoffice, an' Andy an' me went up on the Ridge an' spent the night with him an' helped him through as best we could.

"But he never gave up. He kep' on goin', an' if there was any call for a patriotic rally, he was always right there in his Uncle Sam clothes that might have looked so foolish on anybody else, but

always looked so grand and dignified on him. An' if anybody pitied him about his boy, he'd just say, 'He died to end war, an' to bring a new fellowship into the world, an' it takes the best we've got for that, I reckon.'

"Oh, those were the great days!" the postmaster sighed. "I guess all of us were bigger then than we ever had been before or since. We sort of tapped into somethin' larger than our everyday selves, an' all pulled together for a big end. An' we were mighty proud of our country. We knew our men were doin' fine work over there an' holdin' up our end of the job, an' we were right behind 'em, backin' 'em up for all we were worth. It was the same, I reckon, all over the coun-

try; but here in Newton, 'most any day we could look at our old Uncle Sam an' see shinin' right on his face what the rest of us felt in our hearts. It was like havin' the finest spirit in the country an' the finest spirit in yourself, too, come to life an' go walkin' about right before your eyes.

"An' so it kep' up to the grand climax of the Armistice. We had a big bonfire up on Freedom Ridge to celebrate it. It seemed the right place to have it, up there on Uncle Sam's ridge, where young Sam—the only one of our Newton men to be killed—was born an' raised. We had it fixed, too, that the old man was to touch the bonfire off. There was a big crowd of us up there, an' when it got good and

dark, we made a kind of lane of people for him to come through, an' all commenced to sing 'America.' He came forward, his hat held against his star-covered vest with one hand, an' his lighted torch in the other, an' lookin'—well, I tell you, when he stuck his torch into that pile of brush, an' the sparks an' flames began to leap out, an' he turned his face up to the sky, if the heavens had broken open, an' a flight of angels come down, it wouldn't have surprised me—they'd just have matched what was on that old man's face. He was offerin' that bonfire up in celebration for what his boy an' all our men had died for over there; an' if he didn't actually see his son's spirit that night, he came so

close to it that he didn't have to bother with any seein'.

"We were all kind of exalted, carried off our feet, an' I recollect feelin' that that was just the way I'd always like to think of America —a noble, consecrated Uncle Sam like that, his hat off, his face turned up to the sky, and a flamin' torch in his hand. The Episcopal minister was standin' next to me, an' I heard him say half out loud, to himself like, 'Lord, now lettest Thou thy servant depart in peace.'"

III

The postmaster got down to answer the demands of an inquirer at the window, and to say absently, "No, nothin' for your folks to-day," and then came back to the reporter, whose pencil had been rustling hastily over his pad.

"Well," he resumed, "that was just what the Lord didn't do. He didn't let that old man depart in peace. That night, I guess, was the high-water mark all over the country. After that the tide commenced to turn. We said the Kaiser was licked all right now.

America'd see to it that there'd be some sort of arrangement to put a stop to all this everlastin' foolishness of war; an' so we all settled back again into our ordinary ways of every man for himself. An' plenty of us was glad enough to get back to 'em.

"But the trouble with the old man was, he didn't turn with the tide. He stayed sort of stranded up there on the heights. I don't believe he had it in him to come down. It'd all meant more to him than to most of us, carin' about his country like he did, and losin' his boy. He just naturally *couldn't* settle back into the little old ways. He couldn't *do* it, I tell you. The war had raised up somethin' too big in him to be squeezed back

again into the everyday kind of mean times. Bein' Uncle Sam like that so often, I just b'lieve, 'pon my soul, he'd kind of melted into the spirit of his country—its highest spirit, you know—an' when the rest of us hustled on down to the low grounds again, he stayed, like I said, up there on the heights like the Ark on Ararat when the waters receded.

"Still, everythin' went along well enough with him till the Senate threw down the treaty in November. For all their talk he'd just never dreamed such a thing *could* happen. An' when it did—well, it just about destroyed him. He couldn't believe it. It seemed to cut the ground right from under him, an' leave him all sort of be-

wildered. He looked to see the whole country fly up in a tearin' rage over it. An' when it didn't, when folks just wrote letters to the papers, an' signed a few protests, instead of stampedin' on Washington in a body an' yankin' the Senate up to stand by our allies, an' what our men had died for, why, somethin' died in that old man, an' it was *then*—not when he was killed, mind you, but then—that his heart broke over Sam's death.

"After that he began to act kind of queer. All the light went out of his face, an' you'd catch him mumblin' things over to himself—and his eyes always lookin' so miserable an' shamed. People commenced to say they b'lieved Uncle Sam was losin' his mind, and they

didn't want him about. But I don't b'lieve it was really because they thought he was goin' crazy that they didn't like to see him: I b'lieve it was because he made 'em uncomfortable an' kind of pricked their consciences. He was a kind of left-over from the war, an' from the big way we'd all felt, but wanted to forget now, an' get on back to our little old jobs of makin' money, an' gettin' ahead. Oh! you know how you want to kick a dog if he sits an' looks at you too trustin'? It makes you mad with yourself to have him think so much of you when you know how no-account you are. In the same way, it irritated folks to have that old man around lookin' so hurt an' reproachful, an'

remindin' 'em of all the big things we'd stood for. We weren't big any longer. An' it made us kind of sick to remember, an' it wasn't just that somethin' fine in the country was gone—it was worse'n that; somethin' fine was gone right out of your own self, an' you were ashamed to think of it. An' so, instead of lookin' at him, we were satisfied to listen to all the rotten talk in Washington, that kind of got us balled up an' confused, an' rocked our ideals to sleep, so's we got to thinkin' maybe it was all right, after all, to go back on our friends and let the rest of the world go to hell so long as *we* were tucked safe into our little home bed, with the Atlantic Ocean pulled over our ears. That is, it was all right if

the Republican or Democratic party—whichever one you happened to belong to—didn't get blamed for it. Good God! what was the matter with us!

"But you couldn't rock Uncle Sam to sleep with any now-I-lay-me like that. He showed us how *he* felt plain enough when they asked him to be Uncle Sam in some tableaux they was gettin' up for a church benefit. He said first he wouldn't, an' then all at once he said, 'All right, I'll be there.' A crowd of us was over at the hall havin' a dress rehearsal when in walked the old man. He was dressed as Uncle Sam, all right, but he held his hands like they was tied behind his back, an' a dirty old rope was twisted

round his neck an' arms; his head was bowed on his breast, an' he wouldn't look anybody in the eye.

"Well, at first some of the crowd started in to laugh; but he didn't say a word, he just stood there; an' after they'd looked at him a spell, all the laugh dried up. Well, of course, the committee wouldn't stand for an Uncle Sam in the tableaux like that, an' so they told him.

"He jerked his head up quick enough then, his eyes blazin'. 'No!' he cried. 'No, you're ashamed to show Uncle Sam like this here in this little lost place, but you're willin' enough to have him stand disgraced and dishonoured in the face of the whole world, bound hand and foot with a rope

of everlastin' talk; desertin' his Allies who looked to him, an' betrayin' all that our sons have died for!'

"There he stopped dead, like his own words had hit him in the face. 'What our sons have died for,' he said over again; an' then like that had pulled the cork right out of his heart, and let all his grief loose, he did somethin' I never looked to see *him* do—he—he just burst right out cryin' before us all. 'Oh, my boys! my boys! My sons who are dead!' He kept sobbin', and chokin' over an' over. It made you feel awful to see him, kind of sick an' ashamed, an' you hated yourself for bein' glad when he turned an' stumbled out of the door.

"An' if you'll notice, he didn't say '*my son*,' like you'd expect, but 'my *sons*.' An' I b'lieve, upon my soul, he thought then he was Uncle Sam himself.

"Oh, damn it all! It's been a *rotten* winter!" the postmaster burst out. "What with the old man bein' killed by inches, an' all the high-mindedness an' good-will of the country overlaid, an' the two parties manœuvrin' round, watchin' each other an' ready to spring like a couple of wild cats. No!" he corrected himself, bitterly, "no wild cats about them—dirty alley cats, spittin' at each other on a back fence, and the country's honour on the dump-heap!

"An' as if there wasn't enough mean political work goin' on, Andy

Mason and me had to have a fight. Oh, yes, we did!" he affirmed in response to the reporter's look of surprise. "An' about nothin' better than this measly old post-office. He's a Republican an' I'm Democrat, an' some of his party friends put him up to thinkin' he'd make a good postmaster if the Republicans came in next fall. An' he began to look ahead, an' sort of get things fixed up, in a way I didn't think was on the level. I told him so straight, an' with that he called me—— Well, it ended in our jumpin' on one another right here in the post-office, an' the other fellers havin' to pry us apart. Good Lord! *Andy an' me!*

"Well, the old man got to stayin' more an' more to himself, an'

not comin' down off the Ridge oftener'n once or twice a week for supplies. Every time he did, he'd come into the post-office after the daily papers was in, an' he'd say, 'Have they ratified yet, Blair?' An' every time, of course, I had to tell him no; an' he'd turn round without a word an' go on back to the Ridge. An' I will say, he did get to look right crazy.

IV

"An' that was the way things went until the 20th of March, when there was a right big crowd here in the post-office waitin' for the Eastern mail to see what the Senate had done about the treaty, knowin' they was to vote on it the day before. The old man was here, too, not sayin' anythin' to anybody, just sittin' there with that burnin', miserable look in his eyes. He was all muffled up in an old coat that had belonged to young Sam an' was so big for him it covered him down to the heels.

An' for some reason he wouldn't take it off, though I tried to get him to.

"Well, while we were waitin', we all got to laughin' about a letter from some crazy feller—at least we said he must be crazy—that had come out in the papers a week or so before. Maybe you saw it at the time. It wasn't signed, an' it was written to several of the Senators on both sides. The writer threatened to kill himself if the treaty wasn't ratified. He seemed to have some wild notion about what he called an atonement, an' he said if the treaty was thrown down, it would be such an everlastin' stain on the country's honour that only a blood sacrifice could wash it out. It was a crazy

enough letter, an' of course the papers made a good deal of smart fun of it, an' so did we.

"Well, then the mail came in, an' I unlocked the bag, an' empty-in' it on to the sortin'-shelf, grabbed out the first paper came to hand. 'What's the news, Blair?' they all hollered, an' I just turned round an' held the paper up in front of 'em with its black headlines—

SENATE KILLS TREATY

"The old man jumped to his feet to look, an' then fell back in his chair with a kind of groan, an' put his face down in his hands. Nobody paid much attention to him—because we all knew that was the way he'd take it—but went

on discussin' the news, an' wonderin' what they'd do next in Washington. An' after a little bit the crowd thinned out. Just before he left, Tom Willis laughed an' says, 'Well, that crazy old fool that said he'd kill himself if the treaty was killed didn't do much good, did he?' An' Ed Lamson says, 'Of course he didn't. He might 've known they ain't lookin' at anythin' in Washington beyond their political fences. An' anyhow, he's a darned fool to think any treaty's worth dyin' for. An' what did he mean by an atonement?' he says.

"An' so him and Tom went off together, tryin' to fix in their minds what an atonement was. An' then there wasn't anybody in

the back office here but just me and the old man.

"He got up an' came over an' stood beside me for a long time, not sayin' anything, just standin' there, while I sorted the mail an' stamped the letters. It kind of set me wild to have him stand there, like that, me knowin' how hurt he was; but I didn't say anythin'. I just kep' on pullin' down letters out of the pile with one hand, an' stampin' 'em with the other. An' at last he says, kind of low an' wistful, 'Buddy, do *you* think the man who wrote that letter's a fool?'

"The look on his face made me want to cry; an' just because it did, I answered sharp an' cross-like: 'Of course he's a fool,' I says.

'Anybody's a darned fool who thinks this rotten country's got any ideals worth dyin' for.'

"An' then I could have bitten my tongue out, thinkin' of young Sam an' how *he'd* died. I wanted to turn round an' take that ol' man in my arms, an' say that of course the United States was worth his boy's death; that the country was all right underneath; she'd just got balled up an' led astray by too much talk; but of *course* she'd pull out all right in the end an' see straight an' take her place where she belonged. Maybe if I'd been a woman I could've done it; but as it was, I just went on sortin' out the mail. Oh, it's a lonesome world, all right!

"He stood an' looked at me a

while longer, an' then he turned away. 'Well, good-bye, Buddy,' he says, kind of quiet an' affectionate. I b'lieve he knew all right I didn't mean what I said. An' then he went on out. An' when he went past the window, I was surprised to see he was walkin' with that kind of holy look he used to have. I couldn't think what he had to look like that for *now*, but it made me feel good to see him. It made you feel like out of all his confusion an' misery he'd come into harbour at last. It took some of the bitterness out of me, too, an' I said to myself, 'Well, it can't be such a rotten country if the old men can look like that.'

"An' just then the wind blew his long coat open, an' I saw he

had on his Uncle Sam clothes. I reckon it was because I was busy givin' out the mail that that didn't get right home to me until just as I was lockin' up to go to supper, an' then the remembrance of it jumped at me an' scared me. What in thunder was he dressed like Uncle Sam for now? I tell you I slammed the safe shut, an' locked the door in a hurry.

"Just outside the post-office I found Andy Mason. Him an' me weren't speakin' to one another, but he was the only man I wanted then, an' I broke through an' says, 'Come on up to the Ridge. I'm scared about Uncle Sam.'

"He didn't ask any questions—I reckon it was as hard for him to speak to me as it was for me to

speak to him—but he turned right quick and came with me. The more I thought things over, the more scared I got and the faster I walked. An' when I struck the level of the ridge top, and caught sight of the old man's cabin all lighted up, I broke into a run, an' Andy ran, too. But—but we got there too late. When we burst into the cabin all I could see at first was a heap of red-and-white bunting—stars an' stripes piled up there on the floor—an' then like a flash I made out Uncle Sam all tangled up in the flag, an' dead, with a bullet-hole in his breast.

"The room was all swept out nice an' clean an' lighted up with every lamp he had, like for a festival. Young Sam's picture—the

one in his uniform—was on the mantelshelf, an' that old man had got out his big flag, an' holding it in his left hand, an' standin' before his boy's picture, he'd put a pistol ball through his heart—the place where his grief an' shame for his country hurt him the most, I reckon. An'—an',"—the postmaster's voice faltered—"he *thought* he was offerin' himself up as an atonement for his country, an' for what he thought was the dishonour to his son—an' not just for his own boy—but for all our men killed in the war. It was like I said: there were times when he'd get confused an' think he really *was* Uncle Sam himself. That was one of the times, I reckon, for we found a scrap of paper where he'd written, 'Accept,

O Lord, I beseech Thee, the blood of Uncle Sam for the washing-away of the country's sins, and for an atonement to my dead sons.' And of course, it was him, too—if we hadn't all been fools we'd have known it—who'd written that letter to the Senators—the one we all laughed at, God forgive us! We found a copy of it among his papers.

"Oh, maybe he was cracked all right, him thinkin' he was really Uncle Sam, an' makin' his blood sacrifice; but—but it wouldn't be a bad thing if there was more of us cracked the same way. And he didn't *look* crazy. When Andy an' me had lifted him up an' laid him on his cot bed, closin' his eyes, an' foldin' his hands over the place

in his breast, he didn't look like anythin' I'd ever seen before. He didn't scarcely look human; he looked—he *looked* like the highest thing you've ever *felt*—like—like the way a man *feels* when he gets religion, I guess. He just lay there so dignified an' beautiful, an' so sort of *complete*, havin' surrendered up all he had because his heart was broken for his country.

"Andy an' me stood a long time, on either side of the bed, just lookin' down at him, an' not sayin' anythin'. You could sort of feel yourself shiftin' into deeper an' deeper levels. An' I felt like all that was mean an' little in me had been taken out an' hung up right there before my eyes. An' that mean self had killed the best

that was in me. There was old Uncle Sam lyin' there, dead and beautiful. An' there was Andy an' me fightin' over politics an' a dirty little post-office. An' then I looked across at him, an' I says, 'Andy——'

"Well, with that he just broke all to pieces. 'Don't say it, Blair! for God's sake, don't say it—I understand,' he cried. An' he reached out to me, an' we caught hands over that old dead Uncle Sam. An' then Andy knelt down an' just cried like a child. You—you couldn't look at that old man an' not—an' not——

"Well," the postmaster resumed, after a moment, "it was then Andy took his vow. He got up off his knees, an' speakin' like he

was speakin' right to the old man, he says—

"'Uncle Sam, I've been playin' a dirty game, God forgive me! But after this I'll live as straight an' clean and as high-minded to my country and the rest of the world as—as *you'd* have every American live, so help me God.' And then he kissed the old man's hands where they were folded over the bullet-hole in his breast.

"The words sounded good to me, an' were what I needed, an' so I took the vow, too.

"After that I went down an' fetched Judge Braxton. An' when we'd told him everythin'—about the old man's atonement an' all—an' after he'd looked at him a spell, he says, all broken up, 'Boys,

we've killed him. We've all helped to murder the noblest spirit we've ever seen. Uncle Sam is dead. We must take him down to the courthouse so that people can see what they've done—— An' God forgive *me* for what *I've* done!' he says sort of low to himself.

"I don't know what was hurtin' the judge, but he's been a dyed-in-the-wool party man, an' people have said he'd throw down the country's honour every time so long as the party was saved.

"So we took him down to the courthouse, an' the boys that had been overseas put on their uniforms again an' took turns standin' guard over him. But Andy—he was pretty nigh distracted over Uncle Sam's death—he swore there

shouldn't a one of 'em come near the old man who wouldn't take the vow him an' me had taken. But all the men were hot enough to take it. You couldn't see that old man's face, with that look on it, an' not want to take some sort of a pledge an' make a fresh start with your country and yourself.

"So, with his guard of honour, Uncle Sam lay in state at the courthouse, all dressed up in his stars an' stripes, his hands folded an' done with the world, an' his face turned up to bigger things than we knew. An' word went out how Uncle Sam of Freedom Ridge had died, an' that he was layin' in state at Newton courthouse; an' folks who remembered what he'd been in the war came by train an' by

automobile from all over the three counties. It got to be like a kind of a pilgrimage. An' there was mighty few who could look at him any time, an' not come face to face with their own meanness. He *looked* just like Uncle Sam, an' I tell you he *was* Uncle Sam—the country's noblest an' highest spirit—an' he was dead.

"It was more, too, than just him bein' dead—it was somethin' high and fine that had died right in your own heart—an' you'd killed it yourself. An' it was a funny thing—there was a curious kind of password got started. Nobody knew how it commenced, but the first thing we knew, we was all sayin' it. One person'd meet another an' say, 'Uncle Sam is dead,' an' the

t'other'd answer, 'Yes, an' I killed him.' Oh, it was a sight what that old man made people feel! *He* didn't accuse anybody, nor demand anythin'—he didn't even ask it. He just lay there dead, an' folks wanted to take their hearts out, an' give 'em over to him.

"An' when the day of the funeral came, the crowd was so big there wasn't any church here could hold 'em all, so we just had it right out of doors in the open. Judge Braxton made the address. He's used to public speakin' all right, an' got a good nerve, but all the same that day there were times when he couldn't hardly keep his voice steady. An' when he went back over Uncle Sam's life, an' reminded us of what he'd always stood for,

an' how proud an' carried away it had always made us feel just to look at him durin' the war; an' then how he'd acted when young Sam was killed, why, hardly anybody could keep the tears back.

"An' then he says right solemn an' slow, 'But now that noble old man is dead—crazy and heartbroken by what has happened. Oh, don't blame Washington for it!' he cries out. 'Blame yourself! Let us take the fact right home into our own hearts, an' lay the responsibility there, where it belongs—for it is our own smug selfishness an' indifference to our country's honour that has brought about this great tragedy—the death of Uncle Sam. But, my friends,' he went on again presently, 'when

that broken-hearted old man put the pistol ball through his breast, I solemnly believe that all the love and loyalty to his country, an' all the agony of shame that was stored there, spilled itself out an' has run like the gospel Pentecost into the hearts of all his friends. His atonement has not been in vain. There are some already,' he says, 'who have taken a vow; an' I ask all of you here present, who knew an' gloried in Uncle Sam durin' the war an' who desire a rebirth of that consecrated spirit in their own hearts, an' in the heart of the nation, to repeat these words with me.'

"And with that he put his hand up very solemn, an' said over Andy's vow—only he'd dressed it up and changed it a little bit.

"Well, I don't know where the old man's spirit was, but I hope it wasn't too far off to see those hands go up an' read the look on folks' faces when they dedicated themselves to that vow.

"Oh, maybe it won't make any difference to the rest of the country that Uncle Sam is dead, but it's made a difference to *us!* An' right down here in Newton he's had his resurrection, all right. I tell you," the postmaster said, his voice falling to awed tones, "it was just like I said: he didn't look *human.* It was like—like *God Almighty* lookin' out of that old man's face an' starin' straight at every one of us."

THE END

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